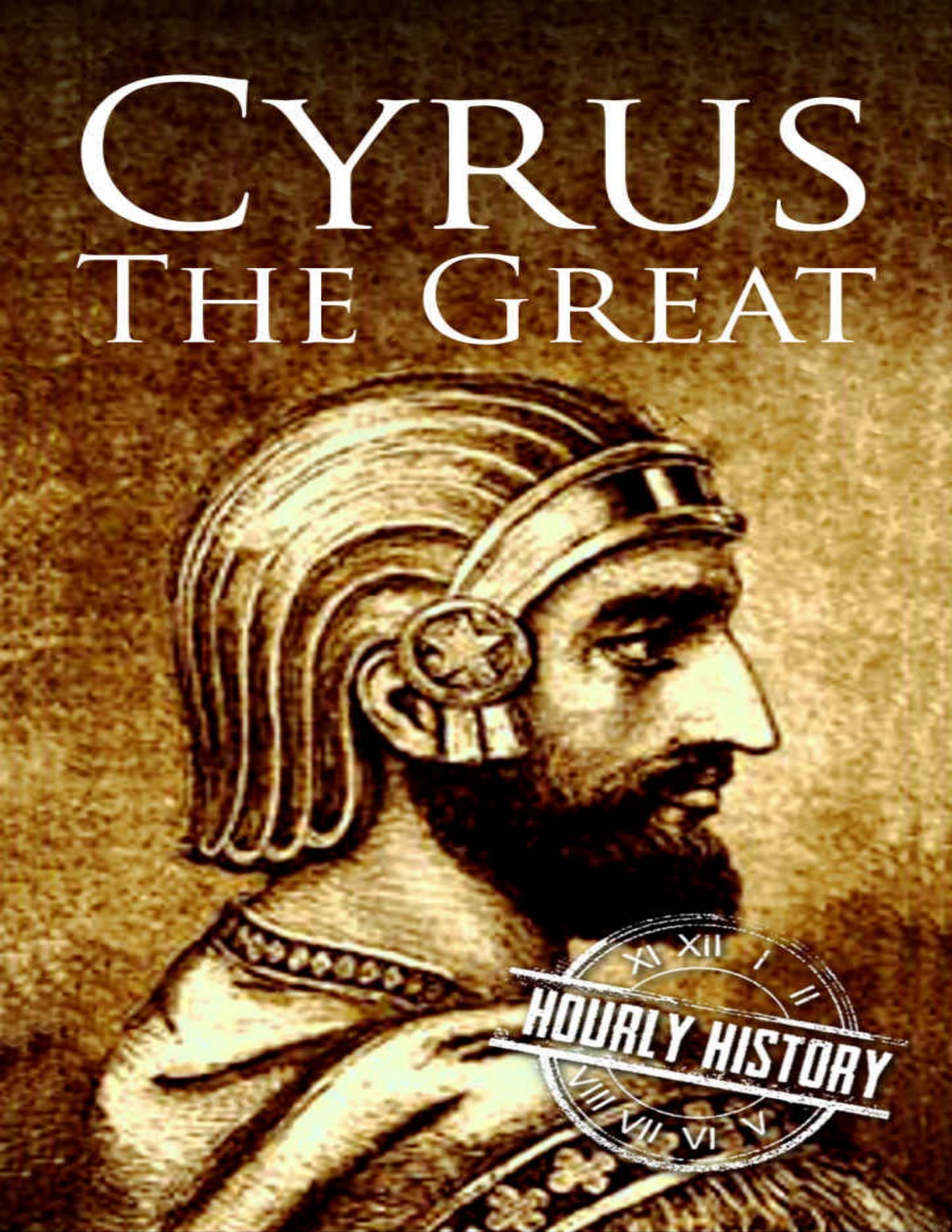
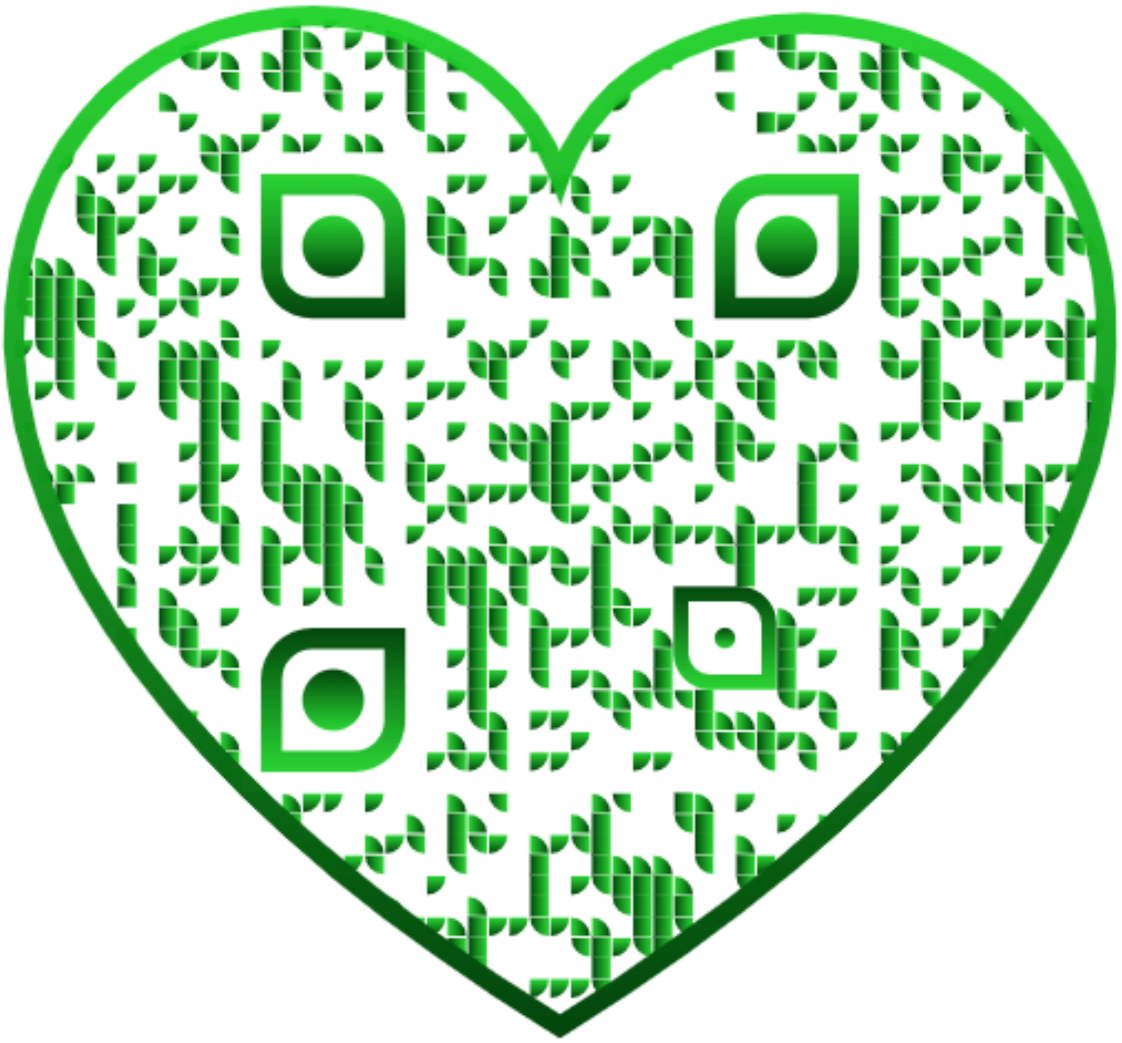
Cyrus The Great





CYRUS THE GREAT

A Life from Beginning to End

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Introduction

Cyrus was one of the greatest leaders that the world had ever known; he was the one in whose footsteps other empire builders would follow. From Alexander the Great to countless Roman emperors and Ottoman sultans—it was the mighty shoes of Cyrus that they all attempted to fill.

More than merely a successful conqueror, Cyrus the Great is known just as much for being a great liberator as he is known for his conquests. In contrast to many other powerful rulers, Cyrus did not seek to oppress his subjects or interfere with their way of life, religions, or local customs. He sought to keep intact a degree of freedom and autonomy in each region by appointing a local satrap, or governor, who ruled in his place. The satraps were overseen by a central government, which did not interfere more than necessary.

It has often been said that history is written by the victors, and the bulk of the documented historical narrative of Cyrus the Great's life comes down to us from the ancient historian Herodotus, who was born in the Persian Empire that Cyrus' created. The name of Cyrus itself is a Latin derivative which in turn was taken from the Greek Kyros. The original Persian name was actually pronounced something like "Kurus." At any rate, for the sake of simplicity we will stick to the traditional, posthumous name that has been attributed to this monarch.

Chapter One

Early Life and Legend

"All men have their frailties; and whoever looks for a friend without imperfections, will never find what he seeks."

—Cyrus the Great

Cyrus is said to have been born sometime between 600 to 580 BCE in the kingdom of Persia (modern-day Iran). Cyrus was an inheritor and beneficiary of the Achaemenid dynasty which dominated the region starting in the seventh century BCE. The founder of the Achaemenids was the ancient ruler Achaemenes, and it was his line of descendants who were then called the Achaemenids. Of these descendants, Cyrus the Great (also known as Cyrus II) was the son of Cambyses I , the ruler of Persia, who in turn was the son of Cyrus I.

Cyrus the Great's mother, Mandane, was the daughter of the powerful king of Media, Astyages . It was Cyrus' grandfather Astyages who wielded the real power since Media, which constituted a region encompassing modern-day northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and part of southeastern Turkey, was the authority that reigned supreme over Persia, which at that time comprised only the southeastern region of modern-day Iran.

Born into this dynastic family, Cyrus had a turbulent childhood from the beginning. Perhaps this is a bit of an understatement because, according to Herodotus, Cyrus the Great was still in his mother's womb when his grandfather plotted to have him killed. According to legend, this decision was apparently made due to one of Astyages' dreams, which his soothsayers had interpreted to mean that his grandson was going to supplant him and bring ruin to the kingdom.

In an ancient world where people lived and breathed dream interpretation, incredible events with incredible consequences could often be kicked off from simple visions of the sleeping mind. And so, the legend goes, these ill

portents led to a plot on the infant Cyrus' life by direct decree of the baby's royal grandfather. However, the man who was tasked with the job of killing Cyrus is said to have felt sorry for him, and so instead of killing him, he adopted the child to be raised as his own. According to Herodotus, the man, called Mithradates, provided his own stillborn son as proof that he had indeed completed the task of killing Cyrus.

Cyrus spent his childhood years with this man who had shown him mercy and kept his true identity hidden to the world. Herodotus then relates that the reality of the child's parentage was only found out when Mithradates imprudently ordered the son of a noble to be beaten because he had not obeyed Cyrus' will. Since Cyrus' adoptive father carried a lower rank, the audacity of the act immediately aroused much suspicion. When Cyrus and Mithradates were interrogated about the offense, the truth finally came out. Rather than being angry, however, it is said that the royal family eagerly took Cyrus back, with all intentions of infanticide apparently long forgotten.

After the hardship his grandfather had inflicted upon him, Cyrus was allowed to reclaim his rightful place in the royal family. If this legend is to be believed, it was indeed a rough beginning for one who was destined to be so great.

Chapter Two

The Persian Empire is Born

"Success always calls for greater generosity—though most people, lost in the darkness of their own egos, treat it as an occasion for greater greed. Collecting boot is not an end itself, but only a means for building an empire. Riches would be of little use to us now—except as a means of winning new friends."

—Cyrus the Great

Much of what is written about Cyrus' early childhood is so intertwined with myth and legend that it becomes extraordinarily difficult to separate fact from fiction. The events of Cyrus' upbringing often come down to us in mythological form, and due to the singular lack of additional information, it is upon these rather fanciful narratives that much of what we know about Cyrus the Great depends.

The story that Herodotus portrays of Cyrus being raised by a peasant family and then returned to his rightful parents picks up just a couple years after the stunning truth of his identity had been revealed. Two years after Cyrus was reunited with his parents in Persia, the 12-year-old prince made a trip to the court of his grandfather Astyages in Media. Here he became a court favorite and greatly endeared himself to his grandfather—the same grandfather who had ordered his death a decade earlier. The events of the following years of Cyrus' early life and adulthood have been lost to history, but it appears he spent at least a few years at the Median court.

It is believed that Cyrus the Great was placed upon the throne of Persia in 559 BCE even though his father had not yet passed away. Even so, Cyrus would not be a completely autonomous ruler for some time and instead would have to follow the whims of his Median overlord and grandfather, Astyages. Much of Cyrus' early rule lies in obscurity because of the many contradictory accounts in existence. What we can deduce from the historical

record, however, is that Cyrus led some fairly pivotal military campaigns early on in his reign. These campaigns—apparently much as the soothsayers had feared—would inevitably lead to friction between Cyrus and Astyages.

The narrative of how the confrontation between the two occurred is steeped in much mythology. One thing that seems certain is that Cyrus did indeed lead an army against the Median Empire around 553 BCE. Since the official historical record is rather scant on the details of the subject, we have no choice but to draw upon the words of the ancient historian Herodotus, who was notorious for taking actual events and interweaving them with embellishment and sometimes outright fabrication.

Nevertheless, according to Herodotus, one of Astyages' leading officials, a man named Harpagus, sought to rebel against the Median king and form an alliance with Cyrus. Harpagus was the official that had originally been given the task of killing Cyrus as an infant. According to this strain of the mythology, not able to do away with Cyrus himself, Harpagus had handed the task over to the sheepherder, Mithradates, who in turn raised Cyrus as his own.

As the story goes, even though the court of Astyages was overjoyed when they found Cyrus alive and well ten years later, Harpagus was severely punished when it was discovered that he had failed to follow orders. According to legend, Astyages was so enraged that he had Harpagus' son killed and dismembered before tricking Harpagus to eat parts of his son at a banquet. Harpagus now reminded Cyrus of these horrible details in his efforts to encourage a rebellion against Astyages. In a letter to Cyrus, Harpagus made his intentions clear, "You know . . . what cruel punishments Astyages inflicted upon me, for my humanity in saving you. The time has now come for retribution. From this time the authority and the dominions of Astyages may be yours." Harpagus further suggested that if Cyrus organized the revolt, he would make sure that several members of Astyages' army switched sides and swelled Cyrus' ranks.

This letter was supposedly delivered through stealth, by way of sewing it up in the carcass of a hare. The hare was then passed off as the fruits of a good hunt and handed over to Cyrus. This form of concealment seemed to serve its purpose, and the spies from Astyages' court were none the wiser to the ploy. After the animal had been duly dissected and the message disseminated, Cyrus quickly decided to take action.

As had been recommended by Harpagus, he raised a large army and

prepared it to march on Media and its capital city Ecbatana. According to Herodotus' version of the story, Cyrus needed to ensure that his men would remain loyal to him during this uprising against Median rule. He had his troops gather in the middle of a forest where he ordered them to chop down several trees to create a clearing. It is said that by the end of the day, the men were starved and exhausted from the heavy work to which they had been subjected.

The day after the clearing was created, Cyrus supposedly had all manner of food and drink put in place for a great banquet, right there on the forest floor. He then ordered his hungry men to devote the day to feasting and to amusing themselves with tales and music. After they had had their fill, Cyrus reminded them of the previous day's hard labor and asked them which they would prefer—the day of working or the day of feasting? Of course, the troops all quickly declared that they preferred the feast day. Cyrus then smartly told the men that, "If you follow me, you will enjoy ease, abundance, and luxury. If you refuse, you must remain where you are, and toil as you do now, and endure your present privations and hardships to the end of your days." This was enough to convince the soldiers to swear their allegiance to Cyrus on the spot.

According to this narrative, it is said that the battle between Cyrus' and Astyages' forces was joined shortly thereafter. As soon as the fighting began, the Medians fought vigorously against Cyrus' men, but it wasn't long before a large chunk of the Median troops deserted the main group and joined forces with the army of Cyrus, just as Harpagus had foretold. This apparently caused so much confusion in the ranks of those that remained loyal to Media that their ability to do battle was severely disrupted. Many threw down their arms and fled as a result.

Back in Ecbatana meanwhile, Astyages was horrified to hear that the long-predicted prophecy of his grandson supplanting him was coming true. Much as the alleged dream had foretold, Cyrus was rising up to conquer his grandfather's dominion. Soon enough, Cyrus took his victorious army and marched on the capital city itself. King Astyages was enraged to know that despite all of his efforts to forestall this fate, doom and destruction were inexorably heading his way. In an attempt to stave off the disaster he saw coming, he sent out a decree which called upon the drafting of every man capable of bearing arms into the Median army. This was a last-ditch effort to be sure, but Astyages put everything he had into cobbling together a large

force of defenders. To boost morale, he even put himself at the head of the force. But even this massive army was no match for the determination of Cyrus and his loyal troops, and this last stand of Astyages proved a miserable failure. His army was decimated, and he was bested by his grandson by 550 BCE.

Upon his glorious victory, Cyrus decided to build a great city on the site of his final battle against Astyages. Construction of Pasargadae, the first dynastic capital of the empire, would begin a few years later around 546 BCE.

According to Herodotus, Astyages was taken to Persia as a prisoner after his defeat. As he languished in his chains, he had to endure the taunts and mockery of his previously loyal underling Harpagus who was reveling in his revenge against the deposed monarch. Despite Harpagus' ill-treatment of Astyages, it is said that Cyrus generally treated him well by seeing to his needs during his captivity and treating him to a kind of mild house arrest.

There is some debate over just how Astyages met his final demise, with some sources saying that several years after his first confinement, Cyrus had requested his guards to bring Astyages to his abode in Persia. He apparently wanted to visit and speak with his grandfather about personal matters, but Astyages was never able to reach his destination. His guards apparently had him travel through a desolate wilderness in order to reach Cyrus, and along the way, the aged former king died from fatigue, exposure, and hunger. Some have suggested that the entire visit was a ruse and the real purpose of the journey was to expose the old man to the elements, in just such a hope that he might perish, thereby lifting the burden of taking care of him from Cyrus' shoulders.

It was a cruel way for anyone to treat their grandfather to be sure, and an act that is decidedly out of character with most other testimonies of Cyrus' benevolent nature. Then again, it must not be forgotten that, according to Herodotus, Astyages had sought to have Cyrus killed when he was only a baby. It is possible that Cyrus still harbored resentment over that fact. At any rate, Cyrus ordered the guards under whose charge his grandfather had perished to be prosecuted to the utmost extent of his imperial law. Although this could have been to deflect blame, perhaps Cyrus really was infuriated by the negligence that had been demonstrated by the royal guard. The truth behind the incident—if the incident did indeed occur at all—has been debated for thousands of years.

As for the people of Media, it is said that they were fairly welcoming of the rule of Cyrus since they viewed him as a much less austere autocrat than Astyages. Cyrus brought with him a newfound tolerance and freedom that the average citizen had never known. In this sense, most viewed him as a kind of divine liberator more than a conqueror—a pattern that would repeat itself many times over during Cyrus' career. It was in this fashion of tolerance and welfare for the average man that Cyrus was able to seamlessly bring together the kingdoms of Media and Persia. He was now the ruler of what would become known as the First Persian Empire or the Achaemenid Empire.

Chapter Three

King of the World

"May all the gods whom I settled in their sacred centers ask daily of Bel and Nabu that my days be long and may they intercede for my welfare. The people of Babylon blessed my kingship, and I settled all the lands in peaceful abodes."

—Cyrus the Great

After deposing his grandfather and uniting the kingdoms of Media and Persia, Cyrus began to look outside these newly established borders to expand his empire even further. First, he pushed further north and seized the realm of Urartu from Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Even after this annexation, Cyrus wanted more, and as such he naturally began to look toward the west and the kingdom of nearby Lydia which was controlled by a king named Croesus.

The forces of Cyrus engaged Croesus' troops around the city of Cappadocia, in what is today part of Turkey. If the legend is to be believed, Cyrus used a cavalry equipped with camels to take on the armies of Croesus, and according to Herodotus, it was the camels that proved the deciding factor in the engagement. As this ancient historian described, "The horse fears the camel and cannot abide the sight or the smell of it. Indeed, as soon as the battle was joined, the very moment the horses smelled the camels and saw them, they bolted back; and down went all hope for Croesus."

Whatever the case may be, it seems that after a stint of bloody, protracted warfare, the Lydian army collapsed and did indeed submit to the rule of Cyrus. In similar fashion to how he treated his own grandfather, it is said that Cyrus spared the life of King Croesus but kept him prisoner after taking over his kingdom. As Herodotus tells it, the troops were allowed to kill anyone else they encountered on the battlefield without mercy, but Croesus was not to be harmed.

The conquest of the Lydian Empire and Asia Minor is believed to have occurred right on the heels of the seizure of Media, most likely ending in the mid-540s BCE. Not a lot is known of the happenings of Cyrus as he consolidated these new holdings, but it is said that his armies were on the march again by 539 BCE, this time leading a massive invasion of the Neo-Babylonian Empire which at that time consisted of modern-day Iraq, Syria, and Israel.

Cyrus was able to catch the Babylonian army off guard, and it is said that the Babylonian military was quickly routed, making the fruits of Babylon ready for Cyrus' taking. It is also said that Cyrus was greatly helped in these efforts by a general named Ugbaru who defected from the Babylonian side. In similar fashion to what happened during the conquest of Media, it is alleged that many Babylonians had in fact become disenchanted with their ruler and were ready to welcome Cyrus as a liberator rather than a conqueror.

During his rule, Cyrus played up this role of beneficent liberator as much as possible, as was most famously demonstrated in his decision to allow the Jews, who had long been exiled by the Babylonians during the so-called Babylonian Captivity, to finally be repatriated back to their native lands, albeit under Persian rule. It was the prophetic Book of Isaiah that is said to have predicted this feat, with a direct mention of a ruler named Cyrus being used as God's right hand to free Israel.

The Hebrew Bible plays yet another role in this story because it is through the Book of Daniel—Daniel being one of the Jewish exiles who had been held in captivity—that we get an inside portrayal of the last days of the Babylonian regent before his removal from power by Cyrus the Great. Named Belshazzar, this Babylonian ruler was said to have visions and dreams of his own doom, which Daniel helped him decipher. In one particularly spectacular scene, Belshazzar is said to have seen a ghostly hand scrawling the Aramaic words "mene, mene, tekel, upharsin" across the walls of his banquet hall. It was Daniel who informed Belshazzar that the handwriting on the wall had spelled out the fall of the Babylonian Empire. Eventually, this vision of a ghostly hand's penmanship gave rise to the old expression, "It's time to see the writing on the wall."

True to the vision, when Cyrus let loose on Babylon, all of Belshazzar's offices of governance were demolished. Unlike other rulers whom Cyrus had spared, Belshazzar himself was killed in the fighting. It seemed that Babylon, whose leadership had become despised even by the Babylonians themselves,

was destined to blot out the corrupt leadership of their past. Seeking to fill the void and insert himself into local beliefs and traditions of the lands he conquered, Cyrus announced himself as the new king of Babylon immediately upon his arrival in the capital city. He even went so far as to say that the popular local deity Marduk had blessed his acquisition of that title.

The resulting massive kingdom, the largest the world had known to that point, stretched from the Indus River in the east to Asia Minor in the west. Now, Cyrus the Great rightfully proclaimed himself “king of the four corners of the world.”

Chapter Four

Love and Marriage

“Whenever you can, act as a liberator. Freedom, dignity, wealth—these three together constitute the greatest happiness of humanity. If you bequeath all three to your people, their love for you will never die.”

—Cyrus the Great

Following the fall of Babylon, Cyrus is said to have acquired immense spoils of war. According to the Greek chronicler Xenophon, one of the greatest of these prizes was a young noblewoman named Panthea. Panthea was said to be the most beautiful woman of Asia, but she was already married to a man named Abradatas, a leader in the armies of Cyrus’ enemies.

Sadly, the forceful taking of an opponent’s wife was a common practice in ancient warfare, and when Panthea was foisted upon Cyrus by his minions, they expected him to take her as his own bride. Cyrus is said to have proven himself to be a man of honor, however, and after hearing Panthea’s sorrowful cries for her husband, he refused to take her as his wife. Instead, Cyrus treated Panthea as a highly respected prisoner of war and ordered his officials to see to it that she was well cared for and treated with dignity. Panthea was said to be very impressed with Cyrus’ good manners and began to openly wonder if her husband Abradatas would be better off switching sides and joining this benevolent monarch.

As the legend goes, Panthea managed to arrange a meeting between the two, and after Abradatas learned of how kind Cyrus had been to his wife, he was overcome with gratitude and immediately pledged his allegiance to Cyrus. Becoming a commander in Cyrus’ army, Abradatas then led a campaign in which he served as a chariot driver.

Abradatas fought hard, but after an intense battle he was cut down. According to Xenophon, after hearing the news of his demise, Cyrus took Panthea to gather the remains of her slain husband. As she sobbed over his

broken body, Cyrus was moved by her grief and promised to pay for Abradatas' funeral in full. Through her tears, Panthea thanked Cyrus and asked if she could be alone with her slain husband. Cyrus obliged her, and as soon as he left her presence, she pulled out a knife and plunged it into her heart, ending her own life. Cyrus was shocked at the sight, but nonetheless kept his word and not only paid for the funeral of the slain Abradatas but also for his wife Panthea.

As touching as this narrative may be, it is hard to say whether or not this story ever actually happened at all. Xenophon was known to create some rather striking embellishments and borrow details from other legends and mythologies, all for the sake of a good story. The story does, however, symbolize the immense respect that Cyrus seemed to engender among those he ruled. From his freeing of the Jews from their Babylonian exile to his acceptance of other cultures and religions to the benevolence with which he treated prisoners of war—Cyrus was great not only for his ability to wage wars but also for the magnanimity that he showed to those he had conquered. Rather than rule with an iron fist as a tyrannical despot, Cyrus was more inclined to try and please his subjects, winning their respect, loyalty, and admiration in the process.

At the very beginning of his conquests in Media, he set this example by taking one of Astyages' daughters, Amytis, as his bride. Cyrus could have had his choice of a wide variety of women, but he knew that creating a bond with a woman of the Median royal line would be much more appreciated by the populace. Wishing to salve any old wounds, Cyrus viewed the union as a means of bringing Media and Persia closer together. As the daughter of Astyages, Amytis would have been Cyrus' aunt, which was most unusual even though marriages between close relatives was not unheard of in ancient times. This detail makes some historians question whether Cyrus only claimed to be the grandson of Astyages to legitimize his rule in Media.

In any case, the fact that Cyrus was marrying a Median princess would be a great help in soothing any latent anxiety over his ascension to the throne. Such a royal wedding would have brought with it tremendous fanfare and public acclaim. It was indeed the perfect vehicle with which Cyrus could quickly move past the violent overthrow of Astyages and move public attention forward to the new royal family that he was establishing.

Even though the union between Cyrus and Amytis did not seem to produce any children, Cyrus would not be in want of children or heirs to

follow him—his other wife would make sure of that. Her name was Cassandane, a name which translated from the ancient Persian dialect means "creation of glory." She was indeed said to be beautiful to behold. Cassandane was a Persian noblewoman, the daughter of Pharnaspes, and is said to have been the love of Cyrus' life. Together they had five children. The first son Cyrus named after his father, Cambyses, and the second he named Bardiya (known by some as Smerdis). These two sons would grow up to be powerful Persian princes, and Cambyses II would eventually succeed Cyrus the Great as the ruler of the Achaemenid Empire.

Cyrus and Cassandane would also have three daughters— Atossa, Artystone, and Roxane. Atossa would later marry Darius I, or as he was later known Darius the Great, who ruled the Achaemenid Empire at the height of its expansion. She also gave birth to the future ruler Xerxes I, carrying the bloodline that stemmed from Cyrus forward for future generations.

Cassandane is said to have once remarked that rather than be separated from Cyrus, she would prefer to "depart [with] her life." Ultimately Cassandane did indeed leave her husband, passing away around 538 BCE. Upon her death, Cyrus, grieved to his core, is said to have staged a six-day period of public mourning throughout the empire. As a final tribute to the dearly departed, Cyrus then had his wife's body interred inside the massive Zendaan-e Solaymaan tower in the Persian capital city of Pasargadae. Even after the official six days of mourning were over, Cyrus would continue to pine for his beloved, mourning her loss for the rest of his life.

Chapter Five

Taking on Queen Tomyris

"The true test of a leader is whether his followers will adhere to his cause from their own volition, enduring the most arduous hardships without being forced to do so, and remaining steadfast in the moments of greatest peril."

—Xenophon

During his lifetime, Cyrus the Great ruled over the largest continuous empire that the world had ever known. Even so, it was never quite enough for Cyrus, and he always wanted more. As soon as he conquered or annexed new territory, it wasn't long before he began contemplating further potential acquisitions. According to Herodotus, as Cyrus reached the later years of his life, it was to his neighbors, the Massagetae , in the north that he turned his attention.

Located in the vicinity of modern-day Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, this remote steppe region was considered untamed and its peoples uncivilized by Persian standards. The only real pretext for waging war against them was the fact that wild bands of nomads had frequently crossed over from the region to raid citizens of Cyrus' empire. Such attacks had long ago spurred Cyrus to action, and he had erected several fortresses to keep a watch over the treacherous wilderness of the northern countries. But now that his empire had grown and reached a point of great stability, Cyrus wished to do more than simply keep a watch over the lands on his northern borders; now, he sought to expand his power and influence over them.

Cyrus was not seeking war for war's sake, however, and if he could avoid bloodshed by engaging in peaceful negotiations, he would gladly make use of the latter course instead. He saw just such an opportunity when he received word that Tomyris, queen of the Massagetae, was a widow. Cyrus, himself a widower, thought that perhaps he could propose marriage to the queen and gain the lands of the Massagetae through love rather than war.

The queen was much more perceptive than Cyrus gave her credit, however, and knowing that she was already past her prime, she fully realized that Cyrus was seeking much more than love by proposing to her. Not wishing to share her dominion with anyone, Queen Tomyris fired off a letter to Cyrus flatly rejecting his overtures. Not one to be so easily dismissed, Cyrus then proceeded to plan for war against the Massagetae. He marched his armies to the natural boundary that lay between the two dominions, the Araxes River. The mighty Araxes flowed from east to west through the region in the direction of the Caspian Sea; if Cyrus were going to challenge the queen, he would have to pass this formidable boundary.

Even while his troops were preparing to make a crossing, Cyrus had additional problems emerge in the form of the aforementioned wild tribal nomads that roamed the steppes. These wanderers mostly lived off the land as hunters and gatherers, but they also were known to engage in acts of cannibalism if the opportunity presented itself. This was, of course, all the more reason for Cyrus and his troops to avoid them entirely. According to Herodotus, the natives of the steppe also apparently had the habit of holding raucous get-togethers in which they inhaled the fumes of a certain plant. This plant apparently made the nomads so inebriated that their subsequent actions became completely unpredictable.

Not wishing to engage in battle with intoxicated tribesmen known to have a penchant for cannibalism, Cyrus was sure to march his troops on a direct path to the river with his eyes on the true prize of the Massagetae that lay on the other side of the waters. In these efforts, Cyrus soon determined that a floating bridge would be the best means of getting his army across the river.

While Cyrus was directing the building of this piece of bridgework, representatives from the court of Queen Tomyris appeared before him and imparted a message sent directly from the queen herself. The queen, seeking to reason with Cyrus, implored him to turn back and leave her in peace. She told him that this would be the wisest course for him to follow for his own welfare. Tomyris ended the letter with a stern warning. After admitting that she knew he most likely would not heed her advice, she filled him in on just what kind of repercussions he could come to expect for his flagrant violation of her sovereignty.

Surprisingly, Tomyris also gave Cyrus some further instructions on how he should proceed if he chose to go to battle against her. Her main concern was the manner with which the two armies should meet. The queen informed

Cyrus that she could pull her forces back further into the interior so that Cyrus's troops could more easily engage them. Or even better, she informed Cyrus that she was willing to cross the river and engage Cyrus on the other side of the waters.

At first glance, the queen appears to be doing Cyrus a favor—an odd thing to do on behalf of someone who was attempting to overthrow her rule. Upon receiving the message, Cyrus found the proposal to be very strange indeed. Unable to make any sense of it, he immediately suspected some form of treachery in the propositions. Even so, he still discussed her overtures at great length with his commanders to see what they might agree upon.

According to Herodotus, most of Cyrus' military advisers seemed to think that the second of the two options would be best. They believed that allowing the queen and her armies to cross the river so that they could engage them in the open steppes bordering Persian territory would give them an ever so slight territorial advantage. Cyrus often left such decisions to a majority rule of his commanders, and he was just about sold on their advice when an unexpected voice of dissent suddenly broke through the ranks.

As it so happened, Cyrus had a special guest with him that argued adamantly against taking any such action. That special guest was the previously conquered King Croesus, who according to some historians became a trusted advisor to Cyrus after his downfall. Through their many travels, by all accounts the two men had grown close, approaching something akin to friendship. It was a rather strange turn of events for conqueror and the conquered to become so friendly, but this was the nature of Cyrus' leadership; he often turned his former enemies into his followers and friends.

Cyrus listened carefully as Croesus implored him, "It seems to me that it will be much better for you not to fall back, but to advance and attack Tomyris in her own dominions; for if you retire in this manner, in the first place, the act itself is discreditable to you: it is a retreat. Then, if, in the battle that follows Tomyris conquers you, she is already advanced three days' march into your dominions, and she may go on, and, before you can take measures for raising another army, make herself mistress of your empire."

Croesus felt that the whole idea of the queen benevolently offering to facilitate the conflict by crossing the river was a poorly disguised ruse to make Cyrus look as if he were retreating from her armed forces. Croesus knew that despite what the queen might be telling Cyrus on the official level, she would probably be utilizing it to the utmost propaganda purposes to her

own troops, leading them to believe that Cyrus and his men were running away from her. This would be of invaluable importance in the game of psychological warfare and would provide an immediate morale booster for the queen's troops.

Croesus also pointed out that if the queen was indeed victorious, her armies would already be safely inside the territory of the Achaemenid Empire, thereby facilitating further aggression to be waged by the queen's armies on the Persian interior—aggression no doubt facilitated in large part by the bridge Cyrus had built which allowed for such an easy crossing of the river in the first place.

Taking all of these things into consideration, and aided by the masterful way in which Croesus presented his argument, Cyrus was finally able to make a decision. He found himself rather quick to agree with Croesus. As such, the two men quickly put a bold new plan of action together.

Chapter Six

Cyrus' Last Stand

"Do what you want, but be prepared in that case to be ruled rather than to rule others. Soft countries breed soft men. For it is not possible for the same land to bear both wonderful fruits and men who are good at war."

—Cyrus the Great

As Cyrus and his advisors began planning the means through which they would cross the river and strike out against Queen Tomyris' army, a daring proposal came forth. Initiated by the former King Croesus, it utilized both cunning and audacity to ensnare their enemies. One might consider the plots and plans of a defeated king such as Croesus ill-advised, but Cyrus was ready to hear him out nonetheless.

To those assembled, Croesus declared, "I will propose the following plan: Cross the river according to Tomyris' offer and advance the three days' journey into her country. Leave a small part of your force there, with a great abundance of your most valuable baggage and supplies—luxuries of all kinds, and rich wines, and such articles as the enemy will most value as plunder. Then fall back with the main body of your army toward the river again, in a secret manner, and encamp in an ambuscade."

After laying out this bit of strategic groundwork, Croesus then excitedly relayed the rest of his plan. Croesus told them, "The enemy will attack your advanced detachment. They will conquer them. They will seize the stores and supplies and will suppose that your whole army is vanquished. They will fall upon the plunder in disorder, and the discipline of their army will be overthrown. They will go to feasting upon the provisions and to drinking the wines, and then, when they are in the midst of their festivities and revelry, you can come back suddenly with the real strength of your army, and wholly overwhelm them."

If this account is true, Croesus was able to captivate Cyrus and his

commanders with his wistful strategy. As such, Cyrus had his messengers inform Queen Tomyris that he would make use of her first suggestion, having her withdraw the main bulk of her forces so that he could cross the river with his whole army to engage her.

The queen accepted the terms of battle, and her armies, led by her own son as their commander, did just as was suggested, drawing back so that Cyrus and his army could move forward. It is said that Cyrus at this point, although happy to have a plan in motion, led his armies with great hesitation. Hesitation, it seems, not only out of doubts over his success but also a small amount of guilt over what he was doing. He was, after all, invading an independent nation without valid enough cause for such an extreme action. Yes, it was true that periodic bandits from her realm were raiding his borderlands, but this was certainly not enough reason to send the troops in.

In truth, the real reason for Cyrus' advance was sheer conquest in and of itself. Cyrus was determined to expand his realm by any means necessary, and so he marched on. Back home meanwhile he had made arrangements for his oldest son to rule in his stead. If worse came to worse and he perished in the field, Cyrus knew that his son would be able to take his place permanently. With his final arrangements made, Cyrus was ready to meet his destiny.

After crossing over into the lands of Queen Tomyris, Cyrus followed the plan and endeavored to use a small contingent of his troops as bait. He ordered a fraction of his main army to detach themselves from the main force and march right into the middle of enemy territory. He had them carry with them expensive goods, foodstuffs, and barrels of wine in order to attract the enemy. Apparently Cyrus had been informed that Tomyris' men were not used to the effects of wine, and so he hoped that their intoxication would give him the upper hand.

Cyrus then calmly watched from the sidelines as these soldiers did indeed draw the ire of the enemy and were waylaid by a force that greatly outnumbered them. Cyrus was apparently willing to sacrifice the lives of these men in order to trick the queen's army into believing that his main martial arm had been defeated. According to the story, Cyrus then continued to keep the rest of his troops on standby while they observed the victorious enemy troops feasting on the food and drinking the wine that they had captured from their defeated foes.

According to Herodotus' narrative, Cyrus waited until the enemy troops

had been completely distracted by their own merriment before moving against them. Once they were sufficiently intoxicated from the veritable buffet he had left them, Cyrus ordered his main army to launch a surprise attack. His plan seemed to work. The queen's troops were indeed caught off guard and were roundly butchered by Cyrus' army. They even managed to capture the queen's son, Spargapises, who had served as a commander of the contingent.

Spargapises himself had been quite overcome with wine at the time of the attack, and it apparently took him a while to sober up enough to realize what had even happened. We are told by Herodotus that when this young man finally came to and discovered himself to be bound in restraints, held prisoner in Cyrus' camp where his comrades lay dead all around him, he quite understandably cried out in despair. Spargapises despaired over the loss of life and his restrained condition to be sure, but more than anything else he despaired over the fact that he had failed his queen mother. Mother and son apparently had a very close and loving relationship, and Spargapises was filled with immense shame in the knowledge that he had let her down.

Despite Spargapises' capture, the situation for the Massagetae was not as bad as it seemed. The queen had made plans for just such a contingency and had left a large group of reserve troops in place. As it turns out, the force that Spargapises led was only a small fraction of the tremendous army she had amassed. So even while Cyrus was under the false assumption that he had just decimated her main army, she was assembling her second wave of troops.

It was a terrible liability to have her son held hostage, however, and not wanting to risk Cyrus doing him harm, Queen Tomyris showed great restraint. She could have simply unleashed her main force and devastated Cyrus then and there, but out of concern for her beloved son she sent him a conciliatory letter instead. Being the cautious monarch that she was, Tomyris still sought to reason with Cyrus, hoping that further bloodshed could be avoided. In doing so, she forfeited the element of surprise that she could have had and bluntly informed Cyrus that he had no cause to celebrate his victory and that he had only conquered one-third of her forces.

The queen then revealed that the main bulk of her army was still operational and fully capable of putting down Cyrus' army for good. After delivering these facts, she implored Cyrus to free her son and turn back his army in order to avoid his own destruction. She promised that if he did so,

she would let bygones be bygones and allow Cyrus and his men to cross over into Persia without any harm. If he did not listen to her pleas for peace, however, she swore a solemn oath that she would vanquish him.

The record is not entirely clear what Cyrus thought of her words; perhaps he believed the queen was desperate and her latest entreaty was merely a ploy to save face and buy time. At any rate, Cyrus' mind was already made up, and he refused to give ground.

After Tomyris made such bold claims about having a huge army with which she could easily dispatch the army of Cyrus, you would think that Cyrus might look into the matter a bit further before launching an attack. After all, according to Herodotus, Cyrus was in possession of a vital source of information—the queen's son. Unless his mother had kept secret the number of troops she had squared away even to her son and general, Spargapises, you would think that an interrogation of the young man would help Cyrus determine the veracity of such claims. But according to Herodotus' story, there would be no opportunity for Cyrus to question the young man.

Not long after Spargapises' capture, he would take his own life. It would seem that being captured by the enemy in such a manner—drunk and completely off-guard—was considered highly dishonorable for the Massagetae. Spargapises felt that he had not only dishonored his queen mother but also his entire country. Even if he were freed and repatriated back to his kingdom, he felt that he could never live down the shame that he had engendered. Seeing how dejected the young man was, it is said that Cyrus—who apparently often had a soft spot for his captives—sought to make Spargapises a little more comfortable by removing his shackles and allowing him to roam freely around his encampment. This proved to be a fatal mistake, however, because as soon as the man's hands were free, he finagled a knife and used it to end his own life.

Cyrus, who seems to have had a track record of people committing suicide when his back was turned, was dismayed to hear the news. But the one who would be even more distraught, of course, was the man's mother, Queen Tomyris. It is said that when she discovered the final fate of her son, she became frantic with grief and rage. In the awful thirst for vengeance that consumed her, she prepared her army that would crush Cyrus once and for all.

On the fateful day that the catastrophic conflict between Queen Tomyris

of the Massagetae and Cyrus the Great came to a head, Cyrus was not sure exactly what to expect, but he sought to fortify his troops as much as possible regardless. As he encouraged his men to march on, it was only when the massive army of the queen could be seen across the horizon that he began to realize his folly. Nevertheless, the two forces engaged each other.

At first, both Cyrus and the queen chose to let loose with the arrows of their bowmen, hoping to take out as many of the enemy's troops from a distance as they possibly could. It was only after all of their arrows were spent that the two sides unleased their infantry who proceeded to hack away at each other in bloody sword-to-sword combat.

Whether Cyrus himself acknowledged it or not, his troops seemed to know just how desperate their situation was, and as such they fought with the desperation of men whose very lives depended upon their success. With a formidable army in front of them and a large river behind them, even retreat was sure to mean certain death. Cyrus' army was trapped; they had no choice but to fight on and hope that they could somehow triumph over the insurmountable odds that they had been dealt.

The queen's forces, on the other hand, knew they had the advantage. They not only had superior numbers, but they were defending their home turf of which they were the masters. They also had a sense of moral justification on their side. It was, after all, their land that was being invaded and their queen that they were avenging over the loss of her son and top commander Spargapises. Neither side refusing to give an inch of ground, it is said that the armies fought a bloody stalemate throughout most of the day. By nightfall, however, it was clear that the Persians were on the losing end with a large chunk of their army completely wiped out.

Unable to hold the enemy back any longer, the Persian lines buckled completely, and the Massagetae overran Cyrus' encampment. It is not entirely clear how Cyrus died—whether he was taken unaware by marauders or he valiantly fought to his last breath—but by morning, his dead body was found by the Massagetae. Victory now clearly theirs for the taking, the overjoyed Massagetae troops hauled the bloody and mangled corpse of Cyrus the Great back to their encampment so that Cyrus' macabre remains could be properly introduced to the queen.

According to Herodotus, Queen Tomyris was still overcome with an insane rage over what had happened to her son. The fact that Cyrus was already dead was not enough to quench her thirst for vengeance. Needing to

vent her anger, she mutilated Cyrus' body. As she defiled Cyrus' corpse, she could be heard screaming, "Miserable wretch! Though I am in the end your conqueror, you have ruined my peace and happiness forever. You have murdered my son. But I promised you your fill of blood, and you shall have it!"

It is said that she ordered her troops to fill a wineskin with Persian blood extracted from recently slaughtered Persian prisoners of war. She then severed Cyrus' head from his body and dropped it in the blood-filled wineskin, after which she screamed, "Drink there, insatiable monster, till your murderous thirst is satisfied!" If we are to believe Herodotus' account, this is how Cyrus the Great met his end. The great king was decisively defeated and utterly destroyed by a nomadic queen of the northern steppes.

Whatever the exact details, his son Cambyses II took over the rule of the Achaemenid Empire upon his father's death around 530 BCE. In the end, Cyrus may have lost the battle against the queen of the Massagetae, but he did not lose the war. The empire he built would continue to expand for many years to come.

Chapter Seven

Aftermath and Succession

"You cannot be buried in obscurity: you are exposed upon a grand theater to the view of the world. If your actions are upright and benevolent, be assured they will augment your power and happiness."

—Cyrus the Great

It remains unclear how the remains of Cyrus were recovered by the Persians, but when it comes to where he was buried most sources lead to one place—the city of Pasargadae in what is modern-day Iran. Ancient historians Arrian and Strabo both gave the same description of his final resting place, and there is indeed an ancient tomb on the spot they cited.

Officially called the Tomb of Cyrus and listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, this grave site is, most concur, at the very least connected with the fallen Persian Empire. Upon seeing the tomb, one is amazed at how structurally sound it is. The massive monolith of the tomb rises from the ruins of the destroyed city of Pasargadae almost as if Cyrus is still standing watch over the remains of his former capital city.

Though the tomb's walls have begun to fade long ago, the Greek historian Plutarch claimed that there was an epitaph engraved on the monument that read, "Oh man, whoever you are and wherever you come from, for I know you will come, I am Cyrus who won the Persians their Empire. Do not therefore begrudge me this bit of earth that covers my bones." Even in death, Cyrus is portrayed as clinging to at least one small corner of the earth from which to stand guard. Within the tomb is said to be a grand edifice on which rests Cyrus' golden coffin within which the broken and battered remains of Cyrus had been finally laid to rest.

After his passing, Cyrus' son and heir to the throne Cambyses II attempted to keep his father's legacy alive through further conquest and territorial acquisitions. Shortly after the death of Cyrus the Great, Cambyses

II was able to overrun and take over Egypt, a country that had remained an independent thorn in the side of Persia during Cyrus' reign. The expansion into the fertile grounds of Egypt, which held one of the largest grain supplies in the ancient world, was a great boon for the kingdom, but Cambyses II wouldn't be able to enjoy it for long since he passed away just a few years after his conquest.

As to who took over after Cambyses II's death remains open to debate. Some believe that he was quite logically replaced by his brother Bardiya, but others contend that it wasn't Bardiya that ascended to the throne but rather an imposter that had schemed his way into power. At any rate, this next succession from the line of Cyrus the Great came to an end after less than a year when the new king was killed by another man scheduled for greatness—Darius the Great.

The line of succession would ultimately end with Darius III who would one day be defeated by yet another man who claimed greatness, the legendary Alexander the Great, thereby putting an end to the Achaemenid Empire in 330 BCE. Nevertheless, the influence of Cyrus and his governance would remain with almost all subsequent empires, from the Greeks to the Romans to the Ottomans, who took heed to the many lessons that Cyrus the Great had imparted.

Conclusion

Cyrus is said to have upward of 70 years old when he died. By the time of his death, Cyrus controlled more land and people than anyone before him. Under his dominion were countless principalities, nationalities, ethnicities, and religions of all kinds. But what made Cyrus so great was not the fact that he lorded it over this diverse empire—his greatness is often cited in his enlightened sense of tolerance. His tolerance was not merely empty talk; it was set down within the legal code of the Achaemenid Empire. This fact was verified with the discovery of the so-called Cyrus Cylinder in the late nineteenth century.

The Cylinder itself is not too impressive, just an old piece of worn-out clay, but the cuneiform writing that covers the object is very interesting indeed. Here, in ancient Akkadian lettering, Cyrus explains his intention not to be an imperial dictator ruling the masses but a benevolent leader doing his utmost to protect the diverse citizens of the Persian Empire. Some even go so far as to describe the Cyrus Cylinder as the first charter of human rights. Most world rulers before and after Cyrus were rather narrowminded in comparison. The Romans were tolerant of diversity to an extent, for example, but at the end of the day, when in Rome you were expected to do as the Romans.

Cyrus saw it differently; his empire was a patchwork of peoples, with none of the patches greater or lesser than the rest. It is for this reason that, as great as his temporal conquests may have been, the benevolence of Cyrus the Great’s leadership stands as his greatest attribute of all.

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